

PSALM 51:4

October 10, 2021

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We've now covered the first three verses of this psalm. Let's review these verses before we move on to some new material. In the first two verses David made four requests to God. The first one was a general request. David asked God to be gracious to him or treat him favorably. He had just committed adultery with Bathsheba, and so he deserved to die. But David asked God to treat him better than he deserved. Then David made three requests that were more specific. He was explaining how he wanted God to show grace to him. First, he asked God to blot out his rebellion. Second, he asked God to completely wash away his guilt. Third, he asked God to cleanse him from his sin.

So David was basically saying the same thing in these three requests. He was using parallel statements to ask God to forgive him in three different ways. In the first request he used a verb that refers to wiping away tears in Isaiah 25. In the second request he used a verb that refers to washing clothes in Exodus 19. And in the third request he used a verb that refers to ceremonial cleansing throughout the book of Leviticus. But David also used three synonymous terms to describe his disobedience. In the first request he called it "rebellion," which stresses that he purposely revolted against God and defied his will. In the second request David used the word "guilt," but a more literal translation here would be "crookedness." He was stating that he went astray from the straight path of righteousness. In the third request David used the word "sin," which focuses on the fact that he missed the mark of God's perfect standard.

And all three of these Hebrew words for disobedience are used together in Exodus 34:6–7. There God said to Moses, "The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin." So no matter how badly we disobey God, he is willing to forgive us. But then God went on to say that "he will not leave the guilty unpunished." So how does God decide whom to forgive and whom to punish? After all, everyone is guilty of sin. The implied answer is only implied here, but we can see it clearly in 1 John 1:9. There John said that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

But there's not much of a confession from David in the first two verses of Psalm 51. The only hint of confession is found in the first person pronoun "my," which he used three times here—once with each term of disobedience. He used the phrases "my rebellion," "my guilt" or crookedness, and "my sin." But in the next few verses, David gave some stronger statements of confession. In verse 3 he said, "For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me." David started this verse with the word "for," which introduces an explanation for what he wrote in verses 1–2. He had just asked God to forgive him,

and now he's going to show how he could expect to be forgiven. He needed to confess his sin, and that's what he focused on doing starting in verse 3.

And he began this verse by saying that he was conscious of his rebellion. The Hebrew word for conscious is a verb that literally means "know." So David was stressing that he had a personal and intimate awareness of his rebellion. The Hebrew word for rebellion is that same one that he used earlier in verse 1. Then David said that his sin was always before him. And the Hebrew word for sin is the same one that he just used in verse 2. But this time he made an interesting observation about his sin. He said that it was always before him. The Hebrew phrase translated "before me" literally means "in front of me." When you drive a car, you always have several things right in front of you. There's a steering wheel there and a speedometer. You also have gauges that give your fuel status and your engine temperature. And these things are very helpful; you wouldn't want to be without them when you're driving.

Now of course David's sin wasn't literally and physically right in front of him. He wasn't forced to watch a video of his sinful deeds on continuous playback. I think what he meant was that they were always on his mind. He couldn't get them out of his head; he was thinking about them constantly. Now at first we might think that this is a terrible situation to be in. And it certainly would have made David feel very uncomfortable, but that's not a bad thing! When the temperature gauge on the dashboard of our car tells us that the engine is overheating, we should be uncomfortable! It's warning us that we need to turn off our car and let it cool down. Then we need to get it checked by a mechanic to make sure that any problems get fixed.

And the same thing is true with our sin gauge. When it warns us that we've committed sin, we need to fix the problem! We need to confess our sin to God and ask him to forgive us, just like David did. Until we do that, our sin is going to stay in front of us. It's going to be on our minds continually. And the reason this happens is that we have a wonderful gift from God called the conscience. God has given every human being a conscience that helps them to understand right from wrong. In Romans 2:15 Paul said that when people sin against their conscience, their thoughts accuse them.

But that's not the only way that people's sin stays in front of them. God builds on the work of the conscience to convict people of their sin. In John 16:8 Jesus said that the Holy Spirit "convict[s] the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment." The Holy Spirit is active in the world right now to work in people's hearts and help them to see their sin. He convinces them of their wrongdoing when they disobey God. And if that's true for unbelievers, then it's even more true for believers, because the Holy Spirit lives in us continually. So the next time we have a nagging thought about a sin we've committed, we should thank God for giving us a conscience and the Holy Spirit to help us see our sin. We should be glad that the sin gauge on our dashboard is working properly. And we should respond by getting the problem fixed right away! All we need to do is admit what we've done and acknowledge that it's wrong. Then God will be faithful and righteous to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Now let's move on to verse 4 in Psalm 51 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote here: "Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass

sentence; you are blameless when you judge.” Notice that there are two statements in this verse. In the first one David reached the pinnacle of his confession, and in the second one he acknowledged that God is right to judge sin. So let’s take a closer look at the first statement. David acknowledged that he had sinned when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. The Hebrew word for sinned is a verb that comes from the same root as the noun for sin in verses 2–3. Once again David was stressing that he had missed the mark of God’s perfect standard.

But the focus here is not on the fact that David sinned. He was emphasizing whom he sinned against. He started this sentence with the prepositional phrase “against you.” Normally prepositional phrases don’t go at the beginning of a sentence in English or in Hebrew. But in Hebrew if a writer wanted to emphasize a word or a phrase, he would put it at the beginning of the sentence. David was stressing that his sin with Bathsheba was really a sin against God. And David brought even more emphasis to the table by adding the phrase “you alone.” But this phrase is actually an incomplete translation of the original Hebrew. David didn’t just repeat the pronoun “you”; he also repeated the preposition “against.” He was emphasizing through both position and repetition that his sin was against God.

But this time David didn’t just state that his sin was against God. He said that it was against God alone. He seemed to be saying that his sin with Bathsheba wasn’t really a sin against her. It was only a sin against God. Most translations have the word “only” here instead of the word “alone,” but the meaning is the same. The Hebrew word refers to being in a state of solitude. For example, it’s used in Genesis 2:18, where God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.” Then God proceeded to create Eve as a companion for the lonely Adam. This Hebrew word is also used in Psalm 86:10, where David wrote, “For you are great and perform wonders; you alone are God.” David was stressing that Yahweh is the only true God.

But is it really true that David’s sin with Bathsheba was only against God? Didn’t he sin against her and her husband as well? I don’t think we can avoid that conclusion. Many sins that we commit are indeed against other people, and we can prove that fact from Scripture. In 1 Samuel 17 we have the well-known story of David defeating Goliath. But then in chapter 18 King Saul became jealous of David’s popularity with the people. And he tried to kill David several times. But Saul’s son Jonathan had become close friends with David, and he tried to intervene. In chapter 19 and verse 4 we see that he “spoke well of David to his father Saul. He said to him: ‘The king should not sin against his servant David. He hasn’t sinned against you; in fact, his actions have been a great advantage to you.’”

So Jonathan believed that people can sin against each other, and he argued that David hadn’t sinned against Saul. So he pleaded with his father not to sin against David. In other words, whenever Saul tried to kill David, he was sinning against David! Jonathan was assuming that it’s possible for one person to sin against another. And we see this truth confirmed clearly in the New Testament. Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 17:3–4: “Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” So in verse 3 Jesus talked about the possibility of a Christian committing sin. But then in verse 4 he explained that he was talking about sin against a fellow believer.

Now the point Jesus was making is that no matter how many times our fellow believers sin against us, we need to forgive them when they repent. The number seven represents completeness here and shouldn't be understood literally. In Matthew 18:21 Peter asked Jesus, "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?" Then in verse 22 Jesus said, "I tell you, not as many as seven, ... but seventy times seven." So Jesus clarified that he wasn't using the number seven literally in Luke 17:4. And I think it's reasonable to conclude that when he said "seventy times seven," he wasn't talking about a literal 490 times. He was just saying that we should always forgive whenever a fellow Christian sins against us and repents. But we shouldn't miss the simple fact that it's possible for us to sin against each other! Jesus made that point very clear in these two passages.

We can see an example of what this looks like in 1 Corinthians 8. In this chapter Paul was talking about meat that was offered to idols, and he argued that there was nothing wrong with eating it. But some Christians thought that it was wrong, and so Paul said that they had a weak conscience. If they ate this meat, they would sin against their conscience. So Paul told the believers with a strong conscience not to be a stumbling block to their fellow believers who had a weak conscience. Listen to what he said in verses 10–12: "For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols? So the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge. Now when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ."

So Paul clearly acknowledged the fact that we can sin against our fellow Christians. But he also said that when we sin against other believers, we're also sinning against the Lord. In other words, this isn't an either-or situation; it's a both-and situation. So why did David say in Psalm 51:4 that his sin with Bathsheba was against God alone? That just doesn't seem to be true, does it? Have we found an error in Scripture? Liberal Bible scholars say "yes," but there's a much better solution here. We should conclude that David was using hyperbole. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. That's exactly what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:29 he said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." Then in verse 30 he said, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away." But we shouldn't understand those statements literally, because removing various body parts won't actually solve our sin problem! The root goes much deeper within us. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus said that our sin flows from our heart.

So we should conclude that Jesus was just using hyperbole or exaggeration in Matthew 5. His point was that we need to treat sin very seriously and take extreme measures to overcome it. And I believe that David was using hyperbole in Psalm 51 as well. His point in verse 4 was that sin is first and foremost against God. Now certainly many sins are also against other people, and so we should seek their forgiveness. But sin is ultimately against God, because he's the one who defines what sin is. And when we sin against another person, we're sinning against someone who is made in God's image and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. That's why God gave us commands like "do not murder," "do not commit adultery," and "do not steal."

And David wasn't the only person in Scripture who recognized that sin is ultimately against God and not

other people. In Genesis 39 Jacob's favorite son Joseph found himself in Egypt because his brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery without their father's knowledge. But verse 2 says that "the LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, serving in the household of his Egyptian master." Then verse 4 says that "Joseph found favor with his master and became his personal attendant. Potiphar also put him in charge of his household and placed all that he owned under his authority." Verse 6 says that Potiphar didn't "concern himself with anything except the food he ate."

But Potiphar wasn't the only one who was impressed with Joseph. Verse 7 tells us that "after some time his master's wife looked longingly at Joseph and said, 'Sleep with me.'" Now Joseph probably could have gotten away with committing adultery, because his master trusted him so much. But Joseph didn't go down that path. Listen to how he responded to Potiphar's wife in verses 8–9: "But he refused. 'Look,' he said to his master's wife, 'with me here my master does not concern himself with anything in his house, and he has put all that he owns under my authority. No one in this house is greater than I am. He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. So how could I do this immense evil, and how could I sin against God?'"

So Joseph knew that if he had committed adultery with his master's wife, he would have been sinning against God. He certainly would have been sinning against Potiphar and his wife as well, though she obviously didn't care about it. But Joseph knew that adultery is ultimately a sin against God, and so did David. In 2 Samuel 12:13 when the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba, he said, "I have sinned against the LORD." And in Psalm 51:4 David made an even stronger statement about his sin. He said to God, "Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight."

The Hebrew word for evil is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It can refer to any harmful or malicious action that we take against others to hurt them or cause them pain. We just saw Joseph use this word in Genesis 39:9 to refer to adultery as an "immense evil." And it's the same word that Nathan used in his message from God to David. In 2 Samuel 12:9 he said, "Why then have you despised the LORD's command by doing what I consider evil? You struck down Uriah the Hethite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife—you murdered him with the Ammonite's sword." So David's adultery with Bathsheba brought great harm on her marriage, and he even tried to cover up his sin by killing her husband. That's why it was appropriate for David to use the word "evil" in Psalm 51:4. And he didn't just say "evil" but "this evil" or more literally "the evil." The Hebrew text has the article here, which is roughly equivalent to our definite article. It's pointing to the evil that David had just committed with Bathsheba.

And David said that he did this evil in God's sight. Sin isn't just against God, but it's defined as being evil in his sight. The reason it's wrong is that he views it that way. Instead we should be doing what's right in God's sight. Listen to what God said to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 12:28: "Be careful to obey all these things I command you, so that you and your children after you may prosper forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God." And normally that's exactly what David did. Listen to 1 Kings 15:5: "For David did what was right in the LORD's sight, and he did not turn aside from anything he had commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hethite." This was the major stain on David's life. This was the time when he failed God the most drastically. But

when David was confronted about his sin, he confessed it to the Lord. He acknowledged that he did what was evil in God's sight and begged God to forgive him.

Now it's interesting that David didn't go into the details of his sin in Psalm 51:4. He admitted that he had sinned and that his sin was ultimately against God. But he didn't mention Bathsheba and Uriah by name, and he didn't state that he committed adultery and murder. He just kept things general, and he even switched from the Hebrew imperfect tense in verse 3 to the Hebrew perfect tense in the beginning of verse 4 to focus on the big picture and give a summary of his behavior. So did he really confess his sins? Was it a genuine confession? I believe the answer is yes, because God accepted his confession in 2 Samuel 12:13. When David said, "I have sinned against the LORD," Nathan responded by saying, "The LORD has taken away your sin." God could see David's heart and knew that he was genuinely sorry for all the sins he had committed in this situation, even though he didn't list them. There's certainly nothing wrong with mentioning the details when we confess our sins to God, and we should do that when we're asking other people to forgive us. But it's not necessary when we're confessing our sins to God, because he knows our hearts.

So we've looked at David's first statement in Psalm 51:4. He reached the pinnacle of his confession and stated that his sin was ultimately against God. But then he gave a second statement at the end of the verse. He said, "So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge." David started this statement with the word "so," and we have a new sentence here in the Christian Standard Bible. But this word comes from a subordinating conjunction in Hebrew, which means that it's not used to start a new sentence. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible are more literal here. They show that we really just have one sentence in verse 4. The second statement flows directly from the first statement. It's introducing the result or the logical consequence of the first statement.

So David confessed his sin against God, and then he acknowledged that God is right to judge sin. The Hebrew word for right indicates conformity to an ethical or moral standard. So God is not obligated to show grace and mercy. He's righteous and upright when he passes sentence against sinners. The Hebrew word translated "pass sentence" more literally means "speak." That's what we see in the New American Standard Bible. But David wasn't just talking about any words that God spoke. He went on to clarify at the end of the verse where he said, "You are blameless when you judge." The Hebrew word for blameless refers to being clean or pure. It's used in Psalm 119:9, which says, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping your word." We should strive to be pure and blameless, but God is already pure and blameless. He's always innocent of any wrongdoing.

But David focused on a specific kind of occasion when God is blameless. He ended Psalm 51:4 with the phrase "when you judge." The Hebrew word for judge refers to giving a verdict in a court case. God is the ultimate judge of the universe, and he gets to decide who is innocent and who is guilty. And he always gives the correct verdict. He never judges anyone unfairly; he is blameless when he judges. No one can legitimately find fault with God's judgment. Paul quoted this statement in Romans 3:4 to support his point that the whole world is guilty before God. So when God used Nathan to confront David about his sin, God was right to do that. First he acted as the prosecutor; he spoke through Nathan and accused

David of sin. Then he acted as the judge and gave the verdict for David's sin. In 2 Samuel 12:11 Nathan said that God would bring disaster on David's family. God forgave David and didn't put him to death, but there were still consequences for his sin.

And David completely accepted God's verdict. He knew that he was guilty of sinning against the Lord. He didn't make excuses or try to shift the blame to others. He requested forgiveness and received it, but he also submitted to the consequences of his sin. When Cain sinned against the Lord, he complained about the consequences of his sin. In Genesis 4:13 he said, "My punishment is too great to bear!" But David accepted the consequences of his sin and knew that God was treating him fairly. We see the same attitude in Luke 23:41. When Jesus was crucified, there were two criminals who were crucified with him. One of them insulted Jesus, but the other one had the right attitude. He told his fellow criminal, "We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did."

So when we sin, we should confess our sin to God and ask him to forgive us. And we know that he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins when we do that. But he is also righteous when he judges sinners. If they don't repent and confess their sins, they deserve eternal punishment. Now thankfully we won't be judged in hell if we repent and confess our sins. But this doesn't mean that there aren't still temporal consequences for our sin. And God is righteous when he allows those consequences to fall on us. So our sin doesn't prevent God from showing his character. Sin doesn't thwart God's plan; he uses it to reveal his holiness and justice. And he receives glory when we confess our sin. In Joshua 7:19 after Achan sinned against God, Joshua said to him, "My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and make a confession to him." So the next time you sin, don't try to hide it. Confess it to God and bring glory to his name. Let's close in prayer and thank God for being the perfect judge over the whole earth.